Kofi Hour

by John R. Bolton

The reason U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan went to Baghdad is not hard to understand: He believed his job required him to make every effort to avoid the use of force against Iraq. Whether one agrees with his view or not, there is no doubt that Annan reflects the ethos in what many U.N. employees reverently call "this house of peace."

What is harder to understand is why the Clinton administration allowed him to go at all, or permitted him any negotiating flexibility. By the time of Annan's departure from New York, the administration had finally, albeit inartfully, rallied an international coalition sufficient to provide political cover for a major military strike against Iraq. Domestically, there was broad, bipartisan agreement about the use of force. Indeed, opinion polls indicated a willingness to go so far as to remove Saddam Hussein from power, a goal well beyond anything contemplated by the administration. American military forces were deployed in the Persian Gulf region and poised to act.

So why back away? Why call in the United Nations? The administration's reluctance to use force was politically motivated, driven—as virtually all of its foreign policy has been—by the predicted domestic political impact. The president's advisers saw that his opinion ratings remained high, despite the growing Lewinsky scandal. If military force were used, there was a real possibility of American casualties and prisoners, or endless pictures of civilian victims in Iraq. There was also a risk that the American public would finally see through the inadequacy and hypocrisy of Clinton's policy in the Persian Gulf. That, in turn, might lead to a weakening of support in Congress and the president's further personal erosion in the face of the independent counsel's investigation. Moreover, postponing the use of force now did not preclude it later, when it might actually help the president if his poll numbers declined precipitously.

These calculated political considerations substantially reinforced the administration's propensity to let others take the lead on matters of armed force. In the opening stage of the present tensions, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright all but publicly invited Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov to have the primary role, and he was only too happy to oblige. In many respects, the United States never recovered the initiative after this early blunder. A turn to Kofi Annan was only the next logical step for an administration that desperately wanted someone else to take responsibility for "resolving" the situation without the use of force. After all, Secretary Albright gained her present job largely by leading the charge to oust Boutros-Boutros Ghali from the United Nations and installing Annan in his place. The United Nations was her chosen vehicle, and Annan was her chosen man. Clinton officials were not surprised by what Annan achieved in Baghdad—they had expected it from the outset, and welcomed it.

The key to the administration's fondness for "multilateralism" is that such an approach offers cover and allows the White House to duck tough decisions. Clinton over the years has repeatedly referred to the United Nations as if it operated independent of its member nations, particularly of the United States. By placing Iraq on the U.N.'s plate, the administration could simultaneously claim credit for Annan's agreement and set him up for a fall if the agreement went sour (or rather, when it does). This may be canny domestic politics, but it is profoundly bad foreign policy.

What comes next? Inevitably, the Iraqis will challenge the U.N. weapons-inspection regime or that regime will be an obviously toothless one, obligating us to resume the debate over whether to use military force and to what end. In the meantime, there are at least three important risks ahead.

First, given the United Nations' visibility, we can count on efforts in the Security Council by the Russians, French, and Chinese to circumscribe our ability to use force "next time" without the Security Council's prior, express approval.

Second, the weapons inspectors will not, under this agreement, be any better able to achieve their objectives; Saddam's efforts to develop, produce, and deliver weapons of mass destruction will continue apace. The Iraqis believe that, since October, they have thwarted the inspectors and rolled back substantial amounts of previously achieved progress. They have done this at no cost—military, political, or diplomatic—which of course only increases the likelihood of further Iraqi transgressions.

Finally, the Iraq-U.N. pact itself singles out "the lifting of sanctions" as something "to bring to the full attention" of the Security Council. This is diplo-speak for the secretary general's implied commitment to urge the council to eliminate the sanctions if the Iraqis do not egregiously subvert the U.N. weapons inspectors' work.

This array of problems is not happy news for those who saw the need for stronger, decisive action against Saddam Hussein. But we are exactly where the administration's policy has predictably put us.

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